

## *Carolyn McCarthy*

*1944–*

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE

DEMOCRAT FROM NEW YORK

*1997–*



Image courtesy of the Member

**PERSONAL TRAGEDY TRANSFORMED CAROLYN MCCARTHY** from a career nurse to a national advocate for gun safety. Her activism brought the political influence that won her election to the House, where Congresswoman McCarthy continues to pursue gun-related legislation as well as health care and education reform.

Carolyn Cook was born in Brooklyn, New York, on January 5, 1944, to Thomas and Irene Cook. She graduated from Long Island's Mineola High School in 1962 and earned a nursing degree from the Glen Cove Nursing School two years later. In 1967, she married Dennis McCarthy, with whom she had one child, Kevin. For 30 years, Carolyn McCarthy worked as a licensed nurse in the intensive care unit of the Glen Cove Hospital. On the evening of December 7, 1993, a gunman opened fire on a commuter train bound from New York City to the Long Island suburbs. Her husband was one of six people killed in the attack. McCarthy's son, Kevin, was shot in the head, and 18 other commuters also were injured. The "Long Island Railroad Massacre" made national headlines and focused Americans' attention on the gun control debate. Carolyn McCarthy, with no previous experience in politics or public speaking, became a highly visible figure in the gun control movement. As she devoted much of her time to successfully nursing her son back to health, she also lobbied lawmakers in Washington on behalf of President William J. Clinton's 1994 Crime Bill and the Assault Weapons Ban.<sup>1</sup>

McCarthy decided to run for the New York House seat encompassing Nassau County, a New York Republican bastion, largely due to anger about then-Representative Dan Frisa's vote to repeal the Assault Weapons Ban. Discouraged from running in the GOP primary by the chairman of the Nassau County Republican Party, McCarthy, a registered Republican, opted to speak with Democrats regarding her congressional candidacy. Despite her inexperience, Minority Leader Richard Gephardt extended his party's support.<sup>2</sup>

During the 1996 general election, McCarthy and Frisa engaged in a nationally scrutinized battle. In spite of Frisa's assertion that his opponent was a one-issue candidate, McCarthy also campaigned on reforming the health care system, providing a basic guaranteed safety net for senior citizens, and environmental protection. Embracing many of the planks of the Clinton campaign, she favored fiscal responsibility and a balanced budget while also supporting a woman's right to choose.<sup>3</sup> McCarthy won election to the 105th Congress (1997–1999), resoundingly defeating Frisa by 57 to 41 percent of the vote. She had tapped into a cross-over vote composed of many Republican middle-class women who propelled her into office as the first woman ever to represent Long Island outside of the boroughs of Brooklyn and Queens. On election night, she wore two buttons: One read, "Failure is not an option," the other, "When women vote women win."<sup>4</sup> In subsequent elections, Republican Gregory R. Becker mounted challenges against McCarthy. McCarthy held off Becker's attack in 1998, capturing just 52 percent of the vote, enough to top Becker's 47 percent, which drew from conservative and right-to-life constituents. In 2000, McCarthy enjoyed a much more comfortable margin, with 61 percent to Becker's 39 percent. In 2002, she defeated GOP candidate Marilyn O'Grady, 56 percent to 43 percent. Two years later, she earned a seat in the 109th Congress (2005–2007) by capturing 63 percent of the vote.<sup>5</sup>

In the 105th Congress, Representative McCarthy was assigned to the Education and Workforce and the Small Business committees. In 1997, she attempted to add an amendment to a juvenile crime bill that would have required childproofing gun triggers. "It is a simple safety lock," McCarthy declared on the House Floor. Republicans and Democrats refused to adopt her measure, but McCarthy received enough national attention for the issue that the Clinton administration was able to win concessions from the major gun manufacturers to add the safety equipment. In 1999, in the wake of several school shooting massacres—the bloodiest of which was at Columbine High School in Colorado—McCarthy also pushed legislation to tighten background checks for gun purchasers, particularly at gun shows.

Congresswoman McCarthy won a seat on the powerful Budget Committee in the 107th Congress (2001–2003), trading in her assignment on the Small Business Committee. She largely voted with the Democrats, supporting their broad environmental, health care, and women's rights agenda. Several times, however, she voted with the Republican majority, supporting a constitutional amendment to forbid flag desecration as well as another to require a two-thirds congressional majority to raise taxes. She recently reversed her earlier vote to repeal the estate tax and has supported repealing the so-called "marriage penalty."<sup>6</sup>

## FOR FURTHER READING

*Biographical Directory of the U.S. Congress*, "Carolyn McCarthy," <http://bioguide.congress.gov>

## NOTES

- 1 Peter Marks, "From One Woman's Tragedy, the Making of an Advocate," 18 August 1994, *New York Times*: A1.
- 2 Marks, "From One Woman's Tragedy, the Making of an Advocate."
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Dan Barry, "L.I. Widow's Story: Next Stop, Washington," 7 November 1996, *New York Times*: A1.
- 5 "Election Statistics, 1920 to Present," <http://clerk.house.gov/members/electionInfo/index.html>.
- 6 *Politics in America*, 2002 (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 2001): 676–677.